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 ARTICLE APPEARED
 ON PAGE C-13

WASHINGTON POST
 10 May 1986

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Will Tuesday Be Fateful for Khomeini?

Will next Tuesday mark the beginning of the end for the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Moslem fundamentalist regime? State Department intelligence analysts believe there's at least a chance that widespread riots throughout Iran on May 13 could shake the foundation of Khomeini's power and eventually lead to his fall.

The date is special because it is just 40 days after the agonizing death from cancer of Khomeini's revered rival, the 85-year-old Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari. Shiite Moslem tradition dictates that 40 days after a loved one dies, the death be commemorated with suitable displays of grief.

In Shariatmadari's case, there is a special reason for honoring him on the 40th day: Khomeini not only ensured his rival's death by refusing to let him seek cancer treatment abroad, but would not grant permission for a funeral of proper dignity. Tuesday would be a suitable occasion for Shariatmadari's thousands of followers to express their outrage about the death and the dishonor perpetrated by Khomeini.

Whether the dead ayatollah's followers can pull off the demonstrations they are planning is a question U.S. experts can't answer. When Shariatmadari died April 3, thousands of Moslem clergymen and other Iranians swarmed into the streets of the holy city of Qom and elsewhere.

Khomeini responded to this "mutiny" by the supposed backbone of his Islamic revolution with the same ferocity he has shown toward less exalted opposition groups. Police arrested the mullahs by the dozen.

It is not clear whether these arrests deprived

Khomeini's opponents of potential leaders to rally around, as he obviously hoped, or will, on the contrary, add the incitement of martyrdom to the widespread public outrage over Shariatmadari.

The day after the old ayatollah died, another group demonstrated its grief and anger. Roughly half the bazaars in Tehran shut down in protest.

A combined opposition of mullahs and merchants could be a powerful engine of destruction, as Khomeini has every reason to know. It was precisely this alliance that brought down the shah and opened the way for Khomeini to seize power.

Another crucial question for Foggy Bottom's Iran-watchers is whether Shariatmadari, beloved as he apparently was, can become the kind of martyr who will galvanize the fanatical Shiites and other discontented elements of the Iranian populace.

State Department sources told our associate Lucette Lagnado it has never been all that clear that Khomeini had a firm grip on the clergy's loyalty. Many of them, like Shariatmadari, believe that exercise of temporal power by a holy man violates Moslem teachings.

But like others in Iran, the clerics were afraid to make public their misgivings about Khomeini's fundamentalist revolution, even though they considered Khomeini himself a flaming hypocrite, using religion to serve his own worldly ambitions.

When he was alive, Shariatmadari courageously spoke out against Khomeini, only to be implicated by the regime in a coup attempt and forced to make a humiliating apology on television. It may well be expecting too much for a dead hero to succeed where he failed in life.